



## Federico Varese

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**Federico Varese**  
Oxford University



### "The Russian Mafia in Italy: A Network Approach"

**Friday, May 6, 2005**  
**12:00 p.m.**  
**Mershon Center**  
**Room 120**

**Federico Varese** is Director of Graduate Studies for Criminology, University Lecturer in Criminology, and a Fellow of Linacre College at Oxford University. Previously, he was Assistant Professor of Sociology at Williams College and William H. Orrick Visiting Professor at Yale University. Formerly a Prize Research Fellow at Nuffield College, Oxford, he obtained a D.Phil. in sociology from the University of Oxford in 1997. He holds a degree in Political Science from Bologna University and an M.Phil. in Social and Political Theory from King's College, Cambridge University.

His main research interests are the study of organized crime, Soviet criminal history, and the dynamics of altruistic behavior. He has published papers in *Archives Européennes de Sociologie*, *Low Intensity Conflict and Law Enforcement*, *Political Studies*, *Cahiers du Monde Russe* and *Rationality & Society*. His latest book, *The Russian Mafia*, was published by Oxford University Press.

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Discussing one of the most difficult and sensitive topics in criminology, Federico Varese came to the Mershon center to present his research on Russian mafia activity in Italy. Varese applied techniques borrowed from the field of physics to map the organization of one Russian mafia organization's relocation to Rome. The method, called network analysis, shows the relationship of specific members of the mafia organization, Sonsova, to other members in the group. According to Varese, this method can help to explain how the illicit activities of Sonsova operated within Italy, which he said allows for a better understanding of transnational mafia activities more broadly.

Varese's data analysis is based upon Italian police transcripts of phone conversations with 182 persons affiliated with Sonsova in Rome from 1995 to 1997. Italian law enforcement officials obtained the phone conversations through an operation geared at toppling Sonsova operations in Italy. The vast majority of Sonsova members caught on the tapes were Italian and Russian and include members of parliament in Russia, Italian bank chairmen, a general in the Italian army, and the head of the Italian state-owned oil company. Additionally, the tapes revealed a connection to a colonel in the North Korean army.

Varese determined that Sonsova operations were moved from Moscow to Rome in order to facilitate the investment of money laundered from illegal activities of racketeering and oil smuggling. Sonsova crime boss Yuri Yesin made the choice to move mafia activities to Italy because there are numerous Russian speaking Italians who were affiliated with Italy's Communist party and because, according to a Sonsova member, "Italy is not party of Europe. You can do whatever you want," Varese claimed.

In applying the network analysis, resembling a web of dots specified by nationality, sex, and importance to the organization, Varese concluded there were two major patterns in Sonsova's organization. First, the analysis revealed an organizational communication strategy he called "between-ness." Between-ness indicates the extent to which a member of the organization must go through another member in order to talk to a third party. The second indicator was "degree of connection," which points to how many people are in touch with a single member of the organization. These patterns allowed Varese to determine if there were distinguishable subgroups within the organization. He determined that there were two primary groups that were not ethnically integrated, joined only by individuals who happened to be bilingual in Russian and Italian.

Varese suggested a possible evolutionary process within the organization, with the Italians at the periphery and the Russians located at the center of the organization. This, he asserts, is attributed to the new arrival of Italians into Sonsova. However, the police operation successfully ousted the group from Italy before greater incorporation took place. Varese indicated that further integration of Russians and Italians could have occurred over time if mafia activities had remained undeterred by criminal investigations.

Varese questioned whether his findings could be broadened and applied to the organization of terrorist cells. While terrorist organizations tend to be nonhierarchical and do not rely on a central figure to manage the organization, the network analysis revealed that Sonsova operated hierarchically. Varese also contended that information streams work differently in terrorist and mafia organizations. In the mafia, if one person is eliminated valuable information is lost, whereas in terrorist missions the loss of an individual is less significant and people are relatively easy to replace. By using a network approach, Varese finds particular patterns of mafia organizations that do not hold for terrorist organizations.